

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES: A MODEL OF TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract: for many, writing activities can be frustrating and boring. Students may find themselves struggling hard but to no avail. It is the task of the writing teachers to make the class lively and encourage students to be spirited in the classroom. One of the strategies that teachers can apply in order to awaken students' spirit in writing classes is by applying active learning strategies. According to the Center of Teaching and Learning, at University of Minnesota (2013), engaging students in small groups or trios can be a low-risk strategy that can ensure the participation of all students. Some examples of how the teaching-learning activities can be conducted will be discussed in the following section. This paper tries to present the possibility of applying active learning strategy in teaching *Academic Writing*, which is the the highest writing class before students go to thesis proposal writing. The course is worth four (4) credits, and offered for the fifth semester students at the English Study Program, Faculty of Language and Learning, Satya Wacana Christian University Salatiga. One central question to be answered in this paper is: "*How can active learning strategies be applied in teaching Academic Writing?*" The following section deals with the theoretical foundation for the study. In summary, this paper is a proposal to a teaching syllabus for Academic Writing course. Opinions from three Academic Writing lecturers from the Faculty of Language and Literature from Satya Wacana Christian University were also gathered in order to perfect the syllabus that I proposed. They were of different levels of seniority: one lecturer was relatively new with four-year experience of teaching, the second was of middle seniority who, by the time of the interview in the end of June, had been teaching for fourteen years, and the last lecturer was a senior one, who had got his professorship, and had taught in tertiary level for about 30 years. This paper will hopefully give new insights to lecturers of writing in general, in particular, of Academic Writing.

Keywords: *active learning, academic writing, syllabus*

Introduction: What Is Active Learning?

According to Farrell (2013), "*Conceptually, active learning implies deep learning on the part of the student as they construct knowledge and create meaning from their surroundings*". In educational setting, still according to Farrell, the applications of active learning range from focusing activities on cooperative structures to active involvement of thinking processes in the learning and application of knowledge. Quoting from Haack (2008), Farrell also mentions that active learning can be like a vehicle to enhance student learning quality.

In line with this, Dewey (in Farrell (2013)), states that in traditional classrooms, learning happens through the transfer of information from knowledgeable sources, like textbooks or teachers or older people; from one who is more informed; they are the passive recipients. Information is stored along with other information, until it is used for a certain purpose.

In contrast, the contemporary views of learning, proposed by the National Research Council's approach to the new science of learning (Farrell, citing from Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999)), "*recognize the importance of allowing children to take control of their own learning by engaging in active learning, meta-cognition and transfer of knowledge*". This new approach to learning favors curriculum methods and materials which are designed to give a chance to students to apply the concepts learned to real-world contexts, build local as well as global communities of practice, and also to allow opportunities for learning in and out the classroom (Huffaker & Calvert (2003), in Farrell (2013)).

Due to the "ever-accelerating pace" of a changing and uncertain world, today's learners must be equipped with appropriate skills and knowledge which are needed to master "interconnected forces of speed, complexity and uncertainty". Hence, learners can be successful and independent. This all implies learning faster, analyzing situations logically and solving problems creatively. Besides that, younger learners should be exposed to technology from an early age, making them "digital natives" who process information in a "random access manner", rather than in a linear way (Prensky, 2001).

Starting from this view point, this research is planned with the purpose of equipping teachers with a model of teaching which make students in academic writing classes active. Some real examples of the activities for active learning strategies are elaborated below.

Some Examples of Active Learning Strategies in the Classroom

In one study, Johnson, Johnson, & Smith (1991), in Farrell (2013), found that when students became passive recipients during lectures, the acquisition of facts took over the development of higher cognitive processes, such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Active learning may include a variety of teaching methods like small group discussion, cooperative learning, role playing, hands-on projects, and teacher driven questioning.

Citing from Simmons & DiStasi (2008), Farrell further describes active learning activities that require students to use a variety of learning techniques, promote retention of large amounts of information, and encourage greater social interaction through peer discussion. Teachers across a wide range of subjects and grade levels are proposing and using active learning strategies. By allowing students to be involved in their own learning, teachers are encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their own education. In the active learning classroom, the teacher's role is to talk less and facilitate more by setting up situations and experiences that allow students to be immersed in the material with their peers. In the meantime, students are socially constructing greater understanding of the curriculum.

For the writing activities, Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Minnesota suggests some activities that engage students in real active participation. Some of them are discussed in the following part.

1. Think/Pair/Share

In this activity, the teacher has attendees turn to someone near them to summarize what they're learning, to answer a question posed during the discussion, or to consider how and why and when they might apply a concept to their own situations.

The objective is to engage participants with the material on an individual level, in pairs, and finally as a large group. The activity can help to organize prior knowledge; brainstorm questions; or summarize, apply, or integrate new information. Approximate time is about ten minutes in every activity.

The procedure is as follows: 1) individuals make reflections or take notes for one minute in response to a question; 2) participants pair up with someone sitting near them and share responses/thoughts verbally for two minutes, or they may choose to work together to create a synthesis of ideas or come to a consensus; 3) the discussion leader randomly chooses a few pairs to give thirty-second summaries of ideas.

In *Academic Writing* class, this activity can be applied since students have worked in couples or trios, and start brainstorming for ideas. This can go on with making outline together.

Write/Pair/Share

The format for this strategy is similar to the think-pair-share, except that students process the question asked of them by writing about it rather than reflecting. After a brief time to note their thoughts, each student turns to a partner to discuss.

The activity closes with the instructor calling on random students to summarize their responses. As with the think-pair-share, the instructor may choose to skip the summary portion of the exercise depending on circumstances.

In *Academic Writing* class, this activity can be applied since students in their groups start to write their argumentative paper draft.

2. Focused Listening

These listings are great follow ups to short presentations (whether via video or in person speaker). In this activity, participants are asked to absorb information that is new and that is vital to the discussion to follow. For example, with an early American Literature session, focused listing might start with asking: "*What is literature?*" Or "*Based on your reading of Thomas Jefferson's letter about 'the novel,' what phrases describe the founders' fears about young women and men reading novels?*"

Then, as a full group, take five to ten minutes to for students to speak and record on a flip chart or a white board as many associations as possible for this prompt. The listing works well to introduce a topic, as an exercise in joining or synthesizing two sets of information (lecture plus follow up reading). In this activity, participants can compare before and after thinking. It will also give the teacher a chance to see if or where participants pick up on topics/ideas, to gather a sense of interests and insights of the specific group, and to establish a base from which the teacher can begin to extend concepts of the workshop to participants' particular concerns.

In the real situation of *Academic Writing* class, this activity can be applied as a chance to present each couple's or group's ideas, and get insights both from the teacher as well as from the peer students.

3. Post Writing Activities

For post writing, the following activities can be done.

a. Student Summaries

During a class session, the teacher may pause and ask students in groups to explain each other the concepts of ideas they have in mind. The teacher can further request that students write or think individually prior to discussing with a partner, making the activity resemble a think/write-pair-share.

b. One Minute Paper or Free Write

The teacher can ask the students to write for 2-3 minutes on their own topic that they have developed with their partners. This is particularly useful in those moments where facilitators/teachers are asking participants to move from one level of understanding to another, from presentation of new ideas to application of ideas, from considerations about self to situations involving others.

The moments of writing provide a *transition* for participants by bringing together prior learning, relevant experience and new insights as a means of moving to a new (aspect of the) topic. The writing also offers participants a moment to explore ideas before discussion, or to bring closure to a session by recording ideas in their minds at that moment.

A minute of writing is also a useful thing when discussion takes a turn that teachers didn't expect – when a particularly good question comes from the group, when discussion keeps circulating around a basic idea rather than inching its way into potential applications or deepening of ideas. Useful with other active learning tools.

The Benefits of ALS (Active Learning Strategies)

Farrell (2013) claims that learning is an act of participation. What is learned and how it is learned is often a result of the socialization between the individual and those around them. Active learning exercises help students to get to know each other better, transforming passive learners into active participants during the transmission of information in classrooms. Sharing values and perspectives as students develop can create “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1992).

Learning is a lifelong and natural process, part of human nature. Students are offered “multiple opportunities” to actively involve and interact with objects, participate in social activities, and reflect on their discoveries. Thus, greater learning occurs. A recent ethnographic study was done in Japan where students were engaged in cooperative learning experiences supports the benefits of active learning strategies in boosting content learning. The results of the study showed that students who engaged in frequent cooperative learning experiences during classroom instruction increased their knowledge and attitudes about science (House, 2008).

Engagement or involvement is inseparable from empowerment. When students make a contribution to the collective activity they are a part of (cooperative learning, complex instruction, etc.), they are empowered to learn. Failure to learn is, still according to Farrell (2013), a result of exclusion from participation. When students are active participants in the processes of learning rather than passive recipients of transferred knowledge, learning is optimized.

Active learning has been found to increase higher order thinking and promote deeper learning of science content in cross-age tutoring situations. Lancor & Schiebel (2008) describe the positive experiences shared between introductory college physics students and second graders when they were paired in order to implement science lessons based on simple machines using active learning techniques.

Results of this study revealed that both the college students and the elementary students experienced increased understanding of science concepts while enjoying their interactive moments together. The active learning techniques used also promoted critical thinking and reflective skills as the college students had to reflect on teaching and learning processes, while learning the deeper meaning of science concepts.

Most studies offer practical suggestions for implementing active learning which include the structuring of rich environments (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1994), along with the use of small group discussion techniques, brainstorming, debates, and sub-grouping techniques such as write-pair-share activities. These activities are known to enhance social interactions.

Most importantly, active-learning yields tremendous cognitive benefits through increased engagement, greater retention, greater understanding, and development of thinking and application skills. At all educational levels, active learning promotes high levels of social development, general knowledge, and practical proficiency. Additionally, the complex changes in our society coupled with the circumstances of a new global economy require individuals who can multi-task, work collaboratively with others, critically think and problem solve.

Collaborative Learning in Writing as a Form of Active Learning

One among many forms of activities dealing with ALS is collaborative work. They are learning models that give emphasis on helping learners to grow autonomously both individually and socially, without neglecting

other peers' roles. Two among other steps proposed by the models as discussed in the previous paragraphs are *text deconstruction*, in which text structures, both the generic structures and the lexical-grammatical structures, are carefully analyzed, and *collaborative learning*, in which learners work collaboratively with their peers in small groups before making individual constructs.

Those steps are two among the five steps in the teaching and learning cycle proposed by Feez and Joyce (1998). These steps may give a great help for students learning to write essays. Combined together, these two learning phases can become a learning model designed help learners improve their essays. Major importance is given not only in the writing products, but also in their writing process.

Applying collaborative learning in a writing class is not an exception. A writing class may be hard for some students, or boring for others. Putting students to work collaboratively in small groups as a preparation before they write individually may give them better ideas and make them more prepared to face their individual tasks. In writing, several pre-writing activities can be conducted before students produce their final product, be it a paragraph or an essay. In the past, however, as Brown (2001) points out, emphasis was given on the product, on how good the writing was. It was very product-oriented. Nowadays, teachers start to realize that product is not the only focus of writing, but how the students come to the final outcomes should be given attention as well. During the writing process, students go through some stages, like planning (outlining or drafting), editing, revising, and writing the final draft. In my opinion, writing process is as important as writing product, for process will determine the product. Students learn a lot during the process of writing, and get better understanding of how they can deliver their messages or ideas to be well accepted by the readers. The more practice they have, the better the product will be. Writing is a skill, and skills need training, just as a knife needs sharpening.

Suggestions and Conclusion

Every course and every classroom have their own special characteristics and nature. It is the teacher who should know which teaching method or strategies are the best to offer in the different classrooms. This paper tries to offer active learning strategies as a teaching and learning model in *Academic Writing*, which always sounds scary and becomes a nightmare for the English Department students of the Faculty of Language and Literature, Satya Wacana Christian University Salatiga.

Activities offered in this proposed model are not merely centered on doing research in the computer laboratory, or doing serious presentation on students' progress report. Various activities are offered, and this can be adjusted with the sub-topics under discussion.

For real Academic Writing classes, these strategies may help students break and overcome their boredom and tiredness over the long-session course: they have the two-hundred-minute class in a row. I suggest that lecturers apply this teaching model along with the various strategies in their classes.

Hopefully, this piece of research can improve the quality of the teaching-learning process of *Academic Writing* in general, and improve students' spirit and active involvement during the learning process.

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